

VZCZCXRO6659
OO RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHAN #1320 3261515
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 221515Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3913
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0740

UNCLAS ATANANARIVO 001320

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/FO, AF/E, DRL
PARIS FOR D'ELIA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [MA](#)
SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS DENOUNCE "THREATS" TO PRESS FREEDOM

REF: A) ANTANANARIVO 1297 B) ANTANANARIVO 1304 C) ANTANANARIVO 1142

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Events stemming from the recent botched coup attempt (reftels A and B) have highlighted the question of freedom of the press in Madagascar. The Government of Madagascar's (GOM) heavy-handed attempts to manage media coverage of coup-plotter General Fidy's actions, alongside a stern warning from President Ravalomanana for journalists to check their facts or face the consequences, have some journalists crying foul. The GOM was arguably in its right to ask for the media's cooperation in light of national security concerns, but it is up for debate whether the government crossed a line. Post will carefully monitor the situation, in particular to see if press freedoms are limited or if the GOM follows through on any alleged threats. For now, it appears the journalists are protesting before they have anything real to protest about. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Late November 18, journalists at two private television and radio stations received visits from a Ministry of Communication official requesting copies of the previous day's coverage of the coup attempt and private interviews with General Fidy (reftels). The stated purpose of the request was not to prevent the stations from airing the tapes (they had already been broadcast in any case), but rather to obtain evidence to assist the GOM in its efforts to find and arrest the renegade general. The GOM representative asked one station to collaborate in ceasing all reporting about General Fidy to avoid inflaming the security situation, saying there were no sanctions against the station "at this time." The other journalist received conflicting messages from high-level Ministry of Communication officials: one told her media stations will be shut down if they continue to broadcast information on General Fidy, while the Minister of Communications privately reassured her that the media was under no threat. After handing over the copies, both stations claim to be on edge and practicing self-censorship. (Note: Post notes that public media, all newspapers, and at least one other private television station continue to freely cover the General Fidy story. End Note.)

13. (U) In response to some inaccurate and sensationalistic coverage of the coup attempt, President Ravalomanana issued a strong warning during a November 19 campaign speech to all journalists and media outlet owners not to publish unchecked news, lest he take action against them (reftel B). Losing his cool in public, the President's statements were a rare departure from a carefully choreographed political appearance. In response, a crisis committee of Malagasy and foreign journalists formed and issued a statement condemning attempts to censor the media and threats to close media stations.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Some journalists are undoubtedly practicing self-censorship, but it appears their allegations of threats to press freedom go far beyond the actual actions of the GOM at this point. The GOM was in its right to ask for the media's cooperation in light of national security concerns, but it is up for debate whether GOM officials overstepped their boundaries by allegedly

suggesting some stations could be closed for failure to cooperate. The government's mishandling of other election-related events in recent weeks (reftel C) suggests this may be another case of slow response followed by rash action. We will continue to monitor this situation throughout the election period, but unless the GOM follows through on the threats alleged to have been made, Post will remain unconvinced that these journalists have a legitimate gripe. END COMMENT.

MCCEE